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## EDITOR'S NOTE

Articles of historic interest on Southern Maryland are requested for possible publication in future issues of **The Record**. Please send your typewritten manuscripts to: Publications, **The Record**, Box 261 Port Tobacco, MD 20677

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## The RECORD

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Mr. Michael J. Mazzeo, Jr., *President*Elwood M. Leviner, *Editor*

## The Forgotten Cavalier: Joseph Lancaster Brent (continued)

by Garth Bowling, Jr.

By October, 1861, Joseph Brent had finished his business in California and was ready to leave. According to family legend, he left written instructions in the hollow of a tree, regarding how his real estate should be dispersed in the event he never returned. Allegedly, the city of Pasadena now sits on much of his land.

He booked passage on a steamer bound for Panama, with his pockets full of gold nuggets. Three hundred Federal soldiers were on board the same ship and the officer in charge, General Sumner, suspected Brent's loyalties. The day before reaching Panama, Brent and two of his friends, William M. Gwynn, ex-United States Senator, and Calhoun Benham, U. S. District Attorney, were arrested for treason. Immediately, Brent began planning his escape. While anchored off the coast of Panama, he offered a native Panamanian, who had come on board to do business, \$250 to bring his boat under Brent's window later that night, but the Panamanian refused to take the risk. The next day, Brent and his two friends were taken under heavy military guard to the train station on the south coast of Panama. From there, they were taken by train across the isthmus to the Atlantic shore. During this trip, Brent contemplated jumping out of the window into the thick woods, but a pair of derringers and a hunting knife had been taken from him before he got in the railroad car, and two soldiers sat across the aisle from him with guns pointed in his direction. Upon leaving the train, they once again boarded a steam ship and were taken to New York where they were incarcerated at Fort Lafayette. Luckily, Benham had political influence with President Lincoln, and in three weeks, Lincoln had the men released.

By now, it was late 1861, and although Brent wanted to immediately head south, his friend, Benham, asked that he wait so that Benham could take care of some business, and then the two could head south together. During this waiting period, Joseph Brent stayed with his brother, Robert, in Baltimore. By late winter, 1862, Brent decided to wait no longer, and secretly paid an English sea captain to take him from Baltimore to Virginia. Brent disguised himself as a drunken sailor and stayed below deck, pretending to be sick, so

that none of the other crew members would talk to him and become suspicious. When they reached the southern tip of Maryland and were in sight of Virginia, Brent asked the captain to let him get in a row boat and head for the Virginia shore. The captain refused, however, saying there would be too much risk and the captain might get arrested. Brent argued with the captain, saying that he refused to go to England and said the captain would have to kill him first. About this time a violent storm was increasing its intensity, and the ship had to anchor just off of Point Lookout, Maryland. That night, under cover of heavy snow, and with the crew below, the captain allowed Brent, and another disguised stowaway, permission to take a row boat and leave the ship. Brent and his companion had to row two or three miles to the Virginia shore. As the snow and darkness blinded them, and the high waves rocked the little boat, death seemed imminent. But a certain peacefulness overcame Brent, and he recorded in his memoirs that he realized at that moment that he had been born upon the Potomac's bank, and that the river would not harm him. In three or four hours they safely made it to the Virginia shore.

He arrived in Richmond a few days before Jefferson Davis' inauguration, and witnessed the event while standing in the rain. Shortly thereafter, upon obtaining an audience with President Davis, Brent explained the rising tensions in Southern California and discussed the possibility of Southern California becoming part of the Confederacy, should the South win the war.

Joseph Brent made it known around Richmond that he wished to volunteer his services as an officer. A man offered to recruit a company of men in South Carolina for him, but Brent declined. His luck held out, however, and he was offered the position of major and assigned to the staff of General John Magruder. Major Brent served in the Peninsula campaign east of Richmond and after the Seven Days' battle, was ordered to report to General Richard Taylor in Louisiana. Here, he served as chief of artillery and ordnance, and was placed in charge of a brigade, with the rank of colonel. He fought gallantly in a number of engagements in this part of the South. After the war, General Taylor wrote



a book in which he highly complimented Brent. In describing him, Taylor wrote: "Ruggedly built, although not a particularly large man, he looked the part of a commander of men." About their first meeting, Taylor recorded: "A lawyer by profession, Major Brent knew nothing of military affairs at the outbreak of the war, but speedily acquainted himself with the technicalities of his new duties. Devoted to work, his energy and administrative ability were felt in every direction."

Brent's greatest military accomplishment during the war was the capture of the Federal ironclad ship, the *Indianola*. Because of his reputation as a cool, fearless and resourceful leader, General Taylor assigned to Brent the hazardous task of attacking the formidable *Indianola*, which menaced the Mississippi River below Vicksburg. Although Major Brent was not a seaman, Taylor believed his tenacity and leadership would compensate. Brent was given a ship called the *Queen of the West*, which was nothing more than an ordinary Mississippi boat with the hull strengthened for ramming other ships. On the bow, Brent placed an artillery piece manned by a few men from the Third Maryland Field Artillery under Sergeant E. H. Langley. Several other small artillery pieces were placed on deck, in addition to numerous cotton bales, used to bank around the boilers, which were exposed above the deck. Sharpshooters were then placed around the deck and on the bales of cotton. One other smaller steamer, converted to a ram, called the *Web*, joined in the exploit, and Brent directed his little armada after the *Indianola*. The enemy was caught unaware in the darkness of the night, and Brent's two ships rammed the enemy several times. As the battle ensued, casualties mounted on both sides, but the grand *Indianola* finally surrendered. As Brent was about to board the enemy's ship, a stack of cotton bales which had been loosened by cannon fire from the *Indianola* toppled over, and one bale landed on Major Brent, knocking him into the cold February water. Brent struggled in the water against the strong frigid current, and was finally rescued, narrowly escaping drowning. As he approached the captured Union commander, Brent was drenched and in pain; without hat, coat or shoes. The Union officer refused to surrender to Brent at first, not believing that his appearance was that of a Confederate officer. Upon further explanation, the Federal officer realized his mistake, and offered his sword as a token of surrender. Since Brent was not in the Navy, he refused to accept a Navy officer's sword, so instead, the Union officer presented his personal gun cane. This weapon, disguised as a walking cane, was accepted by Major Brent with pride. The gun cane is now in the possession of J. L. Brent's granddaughter, Mrs. W. Page Dame, Jr., of Baltimore, and contains this inscription on the handle which Brent had inscribed: "*Indianola* February 24, 1863."

During the Red River campaign, in April of the following year, Brent was instrumental in the Confederate victories at Mansfield and Pleasant Hill. At Pleasant Hill, Brent advanced twelve artillery pieces from the woods, planted them within seven hundred yards of the enemy, opened fire, and overpowered the Federal battery.

In October of 1864, because of his outstanding service, he was commissioned brigadier general of the First Louisiana Brigade of Cavalry. Upon receiving this promotion, Brent took on the challenging task of having a general's coat made. Material was hard to come by in war torn Louisiana, so Brent used his renowned resourcefulness to solve this dilemma. In fact, several years earlier, as chief of ordnance, Brent's resourcefulness helped the army when it was faced with a lack of paper for cartridges. Even most of the newspapers had shut down for lack of paper. Brent came to the rescue and discovered a quantity of wallpaper in some of the local shops and used it for cartridges. In order to obtain the buff colored material necessary for a general's collar, a lady gave him her flannel petticoat, which had yellowed with age. For the general's stars on the collar, he used some of the gold nuggets he had brought from California, and had them formed into stars. His coat is still in existence, and is on display in a small museum in Brunswick, Georgia.

His command covered the Trans-Mississippi area from Arkansas to the Gulf of Mexico, the last line held by the Confederate Army. However, the Confederate Army of the Trans-Mississippi, despite General Robert E. Lee's urging for it to join him and General Joseph Johnston in the East, could not get across the Mississippi River because the entire river was filled with Federal gunboats. Brent's experience in the capturing of the *Indianola* had convinced him that a well organized plan, combined with determination, could succeed. He presented a greatly detailed plan to get the army across the Mississippi, but it was not approved. Had his plan been accepted, and successful, twenty-five thousand fresh troops could have possibly reinforced Lee, and History might have taken a different turn.

When news of the surrender of the armies in the East reached the Confederate Army of the Trans-Mississippi, most realized to prolong the war was useless. General Brent was appointed head of a group of commissioners who visited the Union forces and secured satisfactory surrender terms. He was paroled in May, 1865, at Alexandria, Louisiana.

With his brief, but eventful, military career at an end, General Brent returned to his law practice in Baltimore, and went into partnership with his brother, Robert. In 1870, General Brent married Frances Rosella Kenner of Louisiana, youngest daughter of Duncan Farrar Kenner and his wife, Nanine Bringier. Nanine Bringier Kenner's father owned many large sugar

plantations, and upon her father's death, she inherited these vast Louisiana land holdings. The management of these estates fell upon the shoulders of Duncan Kenner, Brent's father-in-law. Shortly after his marriage, Brent was persuaded to give up his law practice and move to Louisiana to take charge of these large estates, that his marriage had given him an interest in. He successfully managed these estates until the death of his father-in-law in 1889.

During this period of almost two decades, General Brent served two terms in the state legislature and was responsible for having several laws passed that advanced the agricultural interests of the state. He served as president of the Louisiana Agricultural Society, and some believed he would have been elected governor had he remained in the state.

Since his father-in-law's vast land holdings were divided among heirs, Brent was no longer needed to manage the estates and moved back to Baltimore. In Maryland however, he continued his interest in public affairs. He was deputy governor general from Maryland of the Society of Colonial Wars, and served as president of the Maryland Sons of the American Revolution. He published several small works, not for general distribution, but simply to record his memoirs for his family.

Joseph Lancaster Brent died on November 27, 1905 and is buried with his wife in Greenmount Cemetery, in Baltimore. He had two children, a boy and a girl. His daughter had one son, who died at a young age, thus ending that line of the family. His son, Duncan Kenner Brent, had two sons and a daughter. Mrs. W. Page Dame, Jr., his daughter, lives in Baltimore and it was from her that much of the information for this article was obtained.

General Brent's generation had come of age during the cataclysmic time in our nation's past when one's personal convictions were put to the test by the sword. Those, like Joseph Brent, who had the courage of their convictions, freely risked life, limb and fortune to defend their beliefs. Others blended into the background, hoping history would take its natural course without benefit of their participation. Brent was unique, not only because he was one of the last of the nineteenth century cavaliers, or because of his extraordinary military accomplishments and bold deeds, but as a contemporary of his once said, "He has bettered the world by living in it, and in the grand evolution of the human family, has certainly added a decided differential to progress." An article about Joseph Lancaster Brent in the July, 1909 issue of the *Confederate Veteran* magazine, states that, "He was noted for his modesty, his gentleness, his purity of character, and his devotion to principle."

The article concludes with this verse:

"His life was gentle, and the elements  
So mixed in him that Nature might stand up  
And say to all the world: 'This was a man.'"

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#### DATES TO REMEMBER

January 28, 1989 - Winter Meeting, Hawthorne Country Club.

May 13, 1989 - Charles County Birthday Celebration and opening of the Charles County Tourism Season, Special Program at Friendship House and Heritage Commission Gala at Mt. Victoria.

May 19, 1989 - Spring Dinner Meeting, St. Ignatius Church hall, Chapel Point.

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